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THE GARDEN CALENDAR

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A radio talk by W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC radio stations, Tuesday, December 27, 1932.

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Hello Friends: How are you? I trust you had a very pleasant Christmas. Today, I want to talk to you for just a few minutes about the work of the plant explorers. Perhaps many of you know that for the past 40 or 50 years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has sent its plant explorers to practically every nook and corner of the Globe in search of new and valuable seeds and plants to add to our list of crops that we grow in this country. In some cases like a new wheat for example, which reproduces quickly, we see results in a few years, but with certain fruits like the date, it may take 25 or 30 years to get a new variety established.

Only this morning, I picked up a news item from Indio, California, which states that up to December 2nd, thirty-two carloads of the famous Deglet Noor dates had been shipped from that point, and that two or three more carloads would follow for the Holiday trade. Each car contained 1600 to 1900 shipping cases, or about 35,000 pounds. There is nothing unusual about that, you say, - well, let's see what's back of date growing in this country.

That news item carried me back about 32 years to the summer of 1900, when Mr. Walter T. Swingle, one of our plant explorers, journeyed by camel train far into the heart of the Sahara Desert in northern Africa in search of the finest varieties of dates grown by the Arabs, and which were being sold on the best markets of Europe. I've no doubt you are asking the question, why didn't Mr. Swingle simply purchase a few of those high-grade dates on the European markets, bring them to this country, and plant the seeds.

Now, as you probably know, dates grow on date-plam trees --- most of them native of the Old World.--- but dates were introduced into Florida and California nearly two centuries ago under Spanish rule. But, those early attempts at date growing in this country were not successful, because the date does not come true to variety when you plant the seeds, and in order to secure the choicest varieties true to name, we had to import the offshoots or suckers that grow around the base of the older date plams.

In the heart of the Sahara, Mr. Swingle found the variety known as Deglet Noor, or, as the Arabs call it, "Date of the Light," being grown on the fertile oases. The offshoots of this variety were secured, carried to the coast by camel train, and then shipped to this country, and planted at the Cooperative Date Garden at Temple, Arizona. More than 60 per cent of the plants included in this importation survived, and are still growing in this garden. Later importations included other choice varieties, but the "Deglet Noor" is considered the finest of them all. Following the importations the plants were propagated and the 30 odd cars that I referred to as being shipped from Indio, California, are a part of the results.

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Like every new crop that we import, our people have had a lot to learn about date growing, but greater progress has been made in the 25 or 30 years that the improved dates have been grown in this country than during the last 25 centuries of Old-World culture.

You can well guess that the Arab date growers of the Sahara are not progressive or very free in the matter of giving information regarding the methods of pollination of the flower clusters, and other technical practices connected with the production of good dates. Recently, our scientists have discovered that the time of ripening of the clusters of dates can be largely controlled by the kind of pollen used to fertilize the flowers, also that the quality of the dates can be improved by proper cultural practices.

The introduction and establishment of the date industry in our southwestern States is a good example of the work that is being accomplished by our explorers and scientists. Here is another good example. A long time ago the California fig growers imported cuttings of the famous Smyrna fig and planted considerable acreage to this variety. When the trees became old enough to bear they failed to hold their crop of fruit, much to the dismay of the growers. In many cases the plantings were abandoned or the trees destroyed.

In the course of their studies abroad, our explorers discovered that it is necessary to have a very small insect known as the "Blastophaga," to pollinate the Smyrna figs. This insect breeds only in the Caprifig or "Goat Fig," an inedible wild form of fig. You see the flowers and seeds of the fig are on the inside, and there is a very small opening in the end of the fig through which ordinary insects cannot enter, but through which the "Blastophaga" can pass freely and pollinate the figs and cause them to stay on the trees and develop into full-grown figs.

After we imported and established the "Blastophaga," and its host plant the Caprifig the California fig growers were able to grow Smyrna figs. The Smyrna fig, by the way, is used very largely for drying and canning, although considerable quantities are now shipped in the fresh state to the eastern markets.

This is just another example of what the scientists have done and are doing for the growers of horticultural products. In closing today I want to wish each and every one of you a happy New Year, and I'll be with you again next Tuesday.